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Web sites can help you evaluate the energy efficiency of your home

By Ken Sheinkopf
Knight Ridder News Service

Someone recently asked, "What makes a house energy efficient?"

Wow. How do you begin to answer a question like this? It doesn't take long to realize that this is a trick question when you think about all the building materials that go into a home; the way these components are assembled and installed; the differences in the energy efficiency of the appliances, products and other features of the home; and so many other basic design and construction details and strategies.

The U.S. Department of Energy has a fact sheet called "Elements of an Energy-efficient House" that helps answer this question. You can get a copy at <http://www.eere.energy.gov/erec/factsheets/eehouse.html>.

An energy-efficient home has basic elements, including the thermal envelope that surrounds the building, the ventilation system, the heating and cooling systems, and the doors, windows and appliances. That's the short answer, because you have many choices to make for each of these general factors.

Take the home's ventilation system, for example. Good ventilation -- ventilation that is controlled and operates efficiently -- is important in controlling indoor air pollution, in providing the indoor atmosphere and cutting down on air moisture infiltration. This is where the right kind of furnace, water heater and exhaust fans can make a big difference in a home. Also, ventilators can be installed to control ventilation in tight homes.

If you want to find out how your home stacks up against an efficient home, then check out <http://homeenergysaver.lbl.gov>. This Web site lets you input just about every feature of your home. Then it gives you a read-out of how your home compares with an energy-efficient house, including specifics on heating, cooling, water heating, major appliances, lighting and small appliances.

This tool for calculating energy use in homes uses methods developed at

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Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. You can get a great deal of valuable information quickly by putting basic information in the online form.

Keep one thing in mind, though. All the information is based on how products, features and strategies work. You still have the ultimate control, and good energy efficiency calls for you and the other occupants of your home to take the required steps to

keep the home as efficient as possible.

Setting the thermostat too high in winter and too low in summer, leaving lights or fans on in unoccupied rooms and doing other things that increase energy use can defeat a lot of good ideas and strategies that would otherwise save energy. You are still the final factor in lowering your energy use and keeping your home comfortable and affordable.

Ken Sheinkopf is associate director for the Florida Solar Energy Center in Cocoa, Fla. More on energy-efficiency

* For more information on energy efficiency and renewable energy, visit Florida Solar Energy Center at <http://www.fsec.ucf.edu>.

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